GLORY
December 17, 2000
FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

The old song of my spirit has wearied itself out.
It has long ago been learned by heart;
It repeats itself over and over,
Bringing no added joy to my days or lift to my spirit.

I will sing a new song.
I must learn the new song for the new needs
I must fashion new words born of all the new growth
of my life—of my mind—of my spirit.
I must prepare for new melodies that have
never been mind before,
That all that is within me may lift my voice unto God.
Therefore, I shall rejoice with each new day
And delight my spirit in each fresh unfolding.
I will sing, this day, a new song unto the Lord.

Howard Thurman
The Mood of Christmas

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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GLORY
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 12
Luke 2:8-14
" . . . and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." Luke 2:9 (NRSV)

As we draw closer to Bethlehem, O God, startle us again with the old story we have heard so many times. Startle us with the truth and glory of it. Now silence in us any voice but your own, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Every year at about this time, when I've concluded that everything that can be said about Christmas has already been said, I go to my files and pull out a dog-eared copy of an essay which appeared first in *The Christian Century* in 1933 and was reprinted fifty years later. It is by Reinhold Niebuhr, the most important American theologian of the first half of the 20th century, Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, author of many books and whose theology was succinct, readable and very influential. The essay is titled "A Christmas Service in Retrospect." Niebuhr wrote:

> I went to church in the Cathedral on Christmas Day. It is one of the few days of the year on which I am able to attend church without preaching myself. On that day, although a free-church Protestant myself, I prefer a liturgical church with as little sermon as possible. It is not that I don't like to hear anyone but myself preach. I merely dislike most Christmas sermons. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas story and there are not many poets in the pulpit. It is better therefore to be satisfied with the symbolic presentation of the poetry in hymn, anthem and liturgy.

Niebuhr goes on to observe that the preacher ordinarily tries to mount a defense of the historic reality of the Christmas story to make it acceptable to the intellect, a project that continues today. Richard Ostling's article in the Thursday *Tribune* explained the latest argument among New Testament scholars, historians and archaeologists about where Jesus was really born. And as Niebuhr observed, it all gets pretty dull and ultimately uninteresting. And then the great scholar, who devoted his whole life to a reasonable presentation of the Christian faith, makes this wonderful and helpful observation:

> I suppose it is necessary and inevitable that the poetry of religion should be expressed in rational terms, but something is always lost in the rationalization. Dogma is rationally petrified poetry which destroys part of the truth embodied in the tale in the effort to put it in precise terms.

And so that's why at Christmas we do turn to music and art and drama to give expression to a truth bigger than we have words with which to describe it. How much more eloquently can anyone express the meaning of Christmas than Charles Dickens did in *A Christmas Carol* without ever mentioning theology or religion; or O. Henry in *The Gift of the Magi,* or Charles Shultz, for that matter, in the classic *A Charlie Brown Christmas*? It's all there, a reviewer for *The Washington Post* observed last week: the wonder, the awe, the weak and small being lifted up, the inconsequential—even Charlie Brown's pathetic, skinny Christmas tree radiating the very glory of God, as Linus simply recites the story straight—the shepherds, the angels, the glory.

In a fine new book, *Life is a Miracle*, poet Wendell Berry argues eloquently against reductionism, the scientific methodology that assumes that if you reduce a thing to its smallest component parts and study the parts, you will understand the thing itself—the plant, person, experience. Reductionists have trouble with the idea of mystery. To the pure scientific reductionist, for instance, love is only hormones calling to hormones and self-sacrifice, martyrdom, merely our genetic code acting to save the species. "We are alive within mystery, by miracle," Berry wrote (p.45) There is a lot about us—about life—about the world—that cannot be explained.

Actually, the scientists know it better than anybody. The more we discover about the universe, about the human body, the bigger the mystery becomes, the unknown.

It was Albert Einstein himself who wrote, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder, is as good as dead."

And the beautifully haunting Appalachian Carol—

> **I wonder as I wander out under the sky,**
> **How Jesus our Savior did come for to die**
> **For poor ornery sinners like you and like I**
> **I wonder as I wander out under the sky,**
> **When Mary birthed Jesus, twas in a cow's stall**
> **With wise men and shepherds and farmers and all.**
> **But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall**
> **. . . .I wonder as I wander.**

There are experiences that will not be reduced to objective, rational descriptions and truths that cannot always be fully conveyed in propositions and theses however eloquent. Christmas, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the Eternal Word become flesh, is one of these and the preacher, more than anyone, knows it and that is why clergy much wiser than I turn it over to J. S. Bach and the musicians for the morning. Bach himself gave testimony. He was a religious scholar in his own right. Of the 200 books in his personal library, 80 were theological books. His production was enormous, and inscribed on every single one of his manuscripts was his motto, *Soli Deo Gloria,* "To the Glory of God Alone."

I don't know what it was like out on that hillside in the dark and cold, huddling around a small fire—watching the sheep. Luke says there was an angel with a message about a child's birth and then a whole chorus of angels praising God and singing. "The glory of the Lord shone around them and they were sore afraid," the lovely old narrative told it. "Terrified," the literal translation, is more like it.

The philosopher William James wrote his classic, *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1882 and in it observed, "It is as if there were in human consciousness a sense of reality, of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular senses." (p.58)

Luke calls it simply, the Glory of the Lord and that, finally, is what we strive to recall, and celebrate and experience and share in these traditions, and the glorious music of the season, a truth for which we don't have words big enough.

Earlier this season I told about being in Leipzig to visit the church where J. S. Bach was the organist and where he wrote his chorales for the Sunday liturgy, St. Thomas Church, where he presented The Magnificat on Christmas Eve, 1723. We also visited The Frauen Kirche where he frequently played and where protestors and dissenters were given shelter during the darkest days of the East German Communist regime. It was from those churches that thousands and thousands of Germans emerged holding candles—to encourage their fellow citizens to encircle the entire city—as the regime began to topple.

I told about visiting the Wall in Berlin and in the Check Point Charlie Museum seeing a wonderful video of the famous Russian cellist, Msistlav Rostoprovich sitting, alone, in front of the crumbling wall, playing a Bach unaccompanied cello suite.

I have since learned more about him, heard him play—a Bach Suite, and had the very great privilege of meeting him and talking with him. He and his wife irritated the old Soviet regime by advocating for human rights and by sheltering in their home the famous Russian author, patriot and human rights advocate, Alexander Solzhenitsn. In 1973 when they were in Paris for a concert—she too is a distinguished musician, a soprano—the Soviet Government suspended their citizenship and told them they could never go home again. Suddenly the Rostoproviches had no home and had to leave behind belongings, family, friends, music, orchestras. And so they lived in exile and continued their very distinguished musical careers.

Rostoprovich is in his seventies; if you have ever seen him perform with the Chicago Symphony, you know he is charming, effusive—after his concerts he customarily kisses the conductor, concert master, sometimes the entire string section, walks through the orchestra congratulating and kissing the players. He showers the audience with blown kisses, and invites the audience to applaud his cello and the composer. It all happened in the wonderful concert in Dallas where he played the concerto Shostakovich had written for him, and a Bach suite as an encore. Afterward, at a reception and dinner party, I told him

I was a Reformed minister, that a group of us from Chicago had seen the video of his playing at the wall. I told him that I was deeply moved by his gesture and that I had told my congregation in Chicago about it. He liked that a lot and proceeded to tell me the whole story.

He was in Paris when the news began to break that the Berlin Wall was coming down and the Communist regime in East Germany was apparently over. What that meant to him, of course, along with similar events throughout the Eastern Bloc, and in the Soviet Union, was that his exile was over and that he could go home again. How to celebrate this momentous event? How to express his profound joy? He knew what he had to do, he said. He took his cello and caught the first plane to Berlin. He jumped in a cab and instructed the driver to take him to the wall. When he arrived, a funny thing happened, he said. In his concertizing with the world's greatest orchestras, one thing he has never had to think about was the chair he would sit on. There is always a chair ready for him on the stage. You have to have a chair to play a cello. Undaunted, he knocked on the door of the nearest house, explained his situation and the German family produced a small kitchen chair. So the distinguished Russian cellist and human rights advocate did the only thing he could to express himself—to convey his profound joy at the gift of freedom and homecoming and reunion and renewal. He played his cello.

"You chose Bach," I said. "Yes," he responded, with tears in his eyes, "I chose Bach to say thank you to the great God." *Soli Deo Gloria*

"Then the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them . . . ."

Thanks be to God.

Immediately following, *The Magnificat,* J. S. Bach, was presented by the Fourth Presbyterian Church Morning Choir and Chamber Orchestra, John W. W. Sherer conducting.